



## Teamwork in a Stressed out Society: Recognizing and Managing Task vs. Relationship Conflict

When conditions are stressful, as they are for many entering another academic year with the COVID pandemic, people frequently mischaracterize differences of opinion or understanding about how work should be done (i.e., *task-based conflict*) as relationship-based conflict. When we assume it's about people and ties and not about the work, trust breaks down. Teams break down. Task conflicts *become* relationship conflicts. And both performance and how we feel in the work (i.e., *affective outcomes*) suffer.

Unless everyone is on the same page that it's ok the team breaks down, it's important to look at what difficulties in a team can be resolved by resolving differences in how work should be done and is being done. These may yield lively conversation, but it can be productive for teams to work through in terms of both performance and affective outcomes.

**How should they do so?** There are three main processes that organizational psychology scholars have analyzed: collaboration, avoidance, and competition. "An important aspect of team conflict process is the extent to which members' behavioral patterns show 'concern for individuals' vs. 'concern for the team as a whole'" (DeChurch et al., 2013). This parallels general individualist vs. collectivist impulses, with individualistic people and teams more likely to avoid and compete through their differences than to collaborate through them.

Similarly, "teams who score high on indicators of collectivism are therefore unlikely to adopt conflict processes characterized by competition or avoidance" (DeChurch et al., 2013). Openness is a critical element of collaboration because it is important to trust building, trust repair, and trust maintenance.

In a meta-analysis of literature on these issues, both task and relationship conflict are associated with negative team performance and negative affective outcomes. Collaborating as a means of handling these conflicts is positively associated with team performance, but avoiding and competing are negatively associated with team performance. Collaborating is positively associated with affective outcomes.

### Takeaways:

1. Consider how much of the trust challenge that a group has is due to differences in opinion about how the work that people feel is important can and should be done. This may take us into the territories of priorities that can't be aligned or strategies that our organizations may not be able to support, but at least even then it is defined it as a function of the work and not of each other.
2. Resist individualistic tendencies, which are common in STEM disciplinary cultures and which characterize whiteness and some masculinities. Try to put the team or its cause before ourselves.
3. Try to be open with each other, as a practice of collaboration. Keep in mind that whether we think of ourselves as leaders or not, our behavior affects the psychological safety of the group for others. Keep a sense of humor available as a tool.
4. Remember when people are stressed or burned out they're more likely to experience conflicts personally/relationally than externally/in terms of tasks. So, caring about each other enough to know how folks are doing is important for tracking the conditions of people in the team — how they're able to engage through both everyday activities as well as conflicts that inevitably emerge.

**Read:** [Moving beyond relationship and task conflict: Toward a process-state perspective](#)

**Listen:** [Hidden Brain Podcast: You 2.0 How to open your mind](#)